



## THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

### Young poet's words touch hearts outside cell

Documentary on Maxey student reveals hard life, hope

Sunday, June 04, 2006

#### News Staff Reporter

He was a drug dealer, a 16-year-old aiming a loaded .45-caliber handgun at a guy who owed him money. Armed robbery, he figured, "was the best way I could get it."

Now he's a young poet - incarcerated.

He is 19, incarcerated at Maxey Boys Training School in Green Oak Township in southern Livingston County, and the subject of a 15-minute documentary on his life - reflected through the prism of his own poetry and the lens of a Northfield Township librarian.

Because he was incarcerated as a minor, Maxey will not release his name. State Department of Human Services spokeswoman Maureen Sorbet said state and federal laws forbid them from releasing the names of juveniles.

"Revealing the identity can result in discrimination against a youth when he or she leaves the facility," Sorbet said. Additionally, she said, "celebrity status can affect a youth's engagement and effort in our treatment program."

So the documentary - intended to be a teaching instrument - also conceals the poet's identity.

Within weeks, the poet is scheduled to be released from Maxey. He'll go to a halfway house in Ann Arbor, where he'll get a job and attend Washtenaw Community College. By 21, he'll be on his own.

And sometime this summer, the library will hold a large screening of his work, in the "Young Poet Incarcerated" DVD. After that, the DVD will go into the lending collection at the library, which serves Northfield Township including Whitmore Lake, and portions of Green Oak and Brighton townships, and to area schools.

Mike Ball, 53, is the librarian behind the documentary. Also an award-winning online humor columnist, Ball introduced a 12-week creative writing course at Maxey about 18 months ago. He started with nine maximum security juveniles, all violent offenders. He wasn't sure how his plan would go over. But as it worked out, he needn't have worried.

"I could see the fire in their eyes," Ball said. "I would come back from my sessions, and they would have to let the air out of me," he was so emotionally pumped up.

One kid stood out.

"This guy was clearly the leader of the pack," Ball said of the young man who would become the subject of the documentary.

The young poet was clearly a leader in class, not in a gang sense, but because he had strength of will, a

desire to grow, Ball said. He is not at all physically imposing, but has a powerful message. He also has a natural ability to distill his experiences, his emotions, himself, into words and rhythms that resonate.

### **His way**

The poet was born in Flint, the son of a junkie mother and strict father who moved him to Detroit when he was 9. The man and the boy were alone together for a while, before a now-beloved new stepmother, and younger siblings, came along.

But the poet was torn between the perceived "freedom" he experienced with his own mother and her family, and the straighten-up-and-fly-right expectations of a father who wasn't above cuffing the youngster when he got out of line.

And despite good grades, he was almost always out of line.

"I was always gravitating toward trouble. I was in touch with (my mother's family), and found (her way of life) more attractive."

His father was good, the poet said. "But strict. It was all one-sided. Everything was his way."

And the poet wanted it his way.

Eighteen months before a cop rode up on that ill-fated robbery, the poet left home. He crashed here and there, wherever. At 15, he spent four months in juvie, for a committing a break-in.

Crime, he maintains now, "isn't me. It wasn't me then, either. I did things to rebel, against my father, and society."

His father visits now, and he visits his father.

His mother doesn't visit. On a recent home visit, he hoped for a big, emotional welcome when he showed up at her door. It had been a long time. What he got instead was an off-hand, everyday kind of greeting that stung.

"I doubt she loves me. If that's love, I don't want to see hate," he said.

### **The poetry**

Ball started his Maxey class with poetry, and connected immediately with the rap-ready teens. When he moved to short stories, "they were polite," but clearly uninterested. Ball got the message.

Despite their affinity for rap, what the teens wrote, what the poet writes, is true poetry, he said.

"It's much more complicated" than rap, he said. "This goes to the whole heart and soul of these kids - and they are kids - and you can see their hearts."

As the young poet emerged as the potential subject of a mini-documentary, Ball added a weekly solo session with him.

With backing from library Director Ron Loyd, Ball obtained \$5,000 in grants from the Michigan Humanities Council, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Michigan Council of Arts and Cultural affairs. The library matched the grants with Ball's time on the library's dime.

Adding another \$5,000 in services from a graphic designer put the bill for the 15-minute mini-documentary at \$15,000.

The poet did the writing, but Ball interjected form. Ball asked the teen to hone the points he was trying to make into sharper instruments, the kind that can pierce a heart. The poet and Ball discussed the "bad seed"

concept.

Is any child born bad?" Ball asked.

Eventually, the poet responded in verse:

"Where is God, and why did he abandon me in all of this madness,

And why hasn't he answered these questions I've been asking?

If God is my father, then I was born a bastard.

No cradles, no cribs, I was born in a casket. ...

Who would believe good crops come from bad seeds?

Never a bad seed,

Just planted in bad dirt,

Smothered by weeds."

In his work, the poet concedes that he initially regretted his crimes not because he committed them, but because he was caught.

"I didn't understand I was hurting people," he says. Now, he realizes he wasn't hurting just his victims, but also his father and the younger siblings who look up to him.

"I wish I wouldn't have done it in the first place," he said after six months in detention and 21 months at Maxey.

The poet is eager to taste freedom. But now he's glad he won't be alone, that he'll remain under supervision in a halfway house. It's comforting that "they're not just putting me out there."

His schooling at Washtenaw and eventually, he hopes, the University of Michigan, is paid for until he's 21.

"I want to be more educated. Not a thug," he said. "And I don't want to talk like one."

Because, among other things, he wants to become a motivational speaker.

### **The documentary**

Ball helped the poet slow his natural rapid-fire delivery, to make the documentary accessible to a wider audience. The pair worked on pace, movement, diction. The timely pause. A sigh.

The poet composed before he met Mike Ball, but never really wrote his poetry down. Some of the pieces were rap. Others were the beginnings of true poetry, something more than simple repetition of a catchy phrase.

For the documentary, Ball backlit the poet against a dark screen. So the poet is a silhouette, but one that is in motion, dipping, gesturing, popping and pausing. And bowing his head with the weight of the world hanging from a yoke around his neck.

What hits Ball hardest, he said, is that "it's not just this guy. It's 100,000 of this guy" in the national juvenile justice system. "They're children, who have come to a place where the world's not working for them."

Sorbet said the documentary project is an important one.

"It demonstrates some of the talents of the youth in our facilities," she said. "Some people tend to focus on the negative aspects of these young men and women. This project showcases the positive talents of these individuals."

One of Ball's favorite moments in the documentary is one most viewers won't notice. It lasts less than a second.

When Ball shot a brief narrative for the middle of the video, he did it from inside the poet's stark, militarily neat cell. Ball had the poet slam the door on him - the way the door slams behind the poet every night. After the door closes, there's a flash of yellow in the bottom corner of the window.

It's the poet's uniform T-shirt, worn over khaki pants. The poet was checking on Ball, to see how he bore the finality of the sound.

When the documentary was complete, Ball screened it for the class. They swung and swayed and snapped their fingers, he said, a new Beat generation.

But first, the poet watched his work, his life, alone.

He wept.

It's not any more clear what will happen to "Young Poet Incarcerated," the documentary, than to "Young Poet," the man.

He earned his GED at Maxey while he worked on the documentary, and started college courses. He was allowed to start making home visits - while Ball lay awake the night before, silently chanting a mantra: "Don't mess up, don't mess up. don't mess up."

The poet didn't mess up. He returned as required, without getting into new trouble.

The documentary "doesn't sugarcoat anything, but it has a message of hope. It's realistic," Ball said. "That's the power of it - the fallacy in the power of the gun is where he's writing from."

Susan Oppat can be reached at [soppat@annarbornews.com](mailto:soppat@annarbornews.com) or at 734-482-1166.

©2006 Ann Arbor News

© 2006 Michigan Live. All Rights Reserved.